

Art Scene



Previous page: Made from shredded out-of-circulation banknotes, Thai artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert's *Buddha* (2003) stands as a symbol for his countrymen's lost sense of spiritualism in the desire for economic fortitude
Above: Selection of ASEAN artists works in the recent travelling exhibition *Identities versus Globalisation?*

Chiang Mai is not just about picturesque mountain treks, or getting drenched during the Thai New Year festival of Songkran, but is also home to a flourishing contemporary arts scene.

Thailand's second city has a long-established heritage for traditional arts and crafts; evident in the bounty of handicraft shops that mushroom out from the famous Night Bazaar. But this culturally rich region is also home to a stable of local creative talent, whose art comprises both indigenous imagery, as well as more progressive international art trends.

One of the advantages the compact provincial municipality has over the brasher Thai capital is a more centralised community-based environment, where artists band together regularly, discussing, critiquing and planning projects together. Somporn Rodboon a prominent art historian and lecturer at Chiang Mai University, affirms the camaraderie present here: "They are united and encourage one another in their art...They are more interested in the reality of life and the strong culture here, not denying or trying to escape its influence."

In 1998, the region's burgeoning contemporary arts were acknowledged with the opening of **Chiang Mai Art Museum**. The two-storey building, which combines elements of traditional Thai architecture is hardly going to eclipse Bilbao's Guggenheim in innovative design, although with 5,200 square metres of space (nearly half of which is designated for displays), the museum easily outshines Bangkok's inadequate National Gallery.

Located slightly north of the old walled city, and with Doi Suthep mountain as a dramatic backdrop, the museum's light, modern, open-plan interior is definitely its best feature. Away from Chiang Mai's growing urban bustle, the expansive grounds are a popular hangout for Chiang Mai University's art students.

Since its inception, the museum has helped fill a cultural void, providing much needed exhibition space for northern artists, whilst also spurring a number of small independent galleries to open and further bolster the local scene. Free of charge, it's not unusual to view exhibits beside groups of inquisitive school kids, families, and even amber-robed monks.

Aside from exhibitions, there have also been a range of interactive projects offered to broaden general interest, including art workshops for disadvantaged children and textile exhibits by hill-tribe villagers. Aimed at the foreign tourist market, the regular twice-weekly Lanna folk puppet show is staged by the Chiang Mai Puppet Playhouse within the grounds.

With no permanent collection, the museum focuses on its monthly exhibition schedule. So far this year, the gallery walls have been coloured by the work of almost 60 artists from all 10 ASEAN member countries in an ambitious exhibition with the self-explanatory title *Identities versus Globalisation?* followed by Malaysian artist Chang Fee Ming's highly personal collection of sumptuous watercolour paintings *Mekong*, which reflect his impressions of riverine life through the region, captured during a seven-year odyssey.

One of this year's upcoming highlights is sure to be the combined retrospectives of two of the country's most experimental and internationally acclaimed artists, Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Tentatively set for July, this will be the first ever exhibition on home turf for Rirkrit, who has won several top honours as one of the world's best contemporary artists.

Chiang Mai Art Museum is located at the end of Nimanhamin Rd, a broad street that is becoming increasingly enlivened by local coffee houses, hip new nightspots, and numerous boutique décor and collectible stores. A half-day could easily be spent visiting the museum and its nearby surrounds. 🍷



Chiang Mai Art Museum
Tel/Fax: +66 5 321 8280
Open: Tue - Sun, 9.30am - 5pm
www.cmu-museum.org
(Thai script with English headings)



Art North
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